

The Iron Claw

Author of
"THE OCCASIONAL OFFENDER," "THE WIRE TAPERS," "GUN RUNNERS," ETC.
Novelized from
THE PATHE PHOTO PLAY
OF THE
SAME NAME

SYNOPSIS.

On Windward Island Pallidori intrigues Mrs. Golden into an appearance of evil which causes Golden to capture and torture the Italian by branding his face and crushing his hand. Pallidori opens the dyke gates and floods the island and in the general rush to escape the flood kidnaps Golden's six-year-old daughter Margery. Twelve years later in New York a Masked One calling himself "The Hammer of God" rescues an eighteen-year-old girl from the cadet Casavanti, to whom Jules Legar has delivered her, and takes her to the home of Enoch Golden, millionaire, whence she is captured by Legar. Legar and Stein are discovered by Manley, Golden's secretary, setting fire to Golden's buildings, but escape. Margery's mother fruitlessly implores Enoch Golden to find their daughter. The Masked One again takes Margery away from Legar. Legar looks to the Third National bank, but again the Laughing Mask frustrates his plans. Legar sends Golden "The Spotted Warning," demanding a portion of a share of the Windward Island. Margery meets her mother. The chart is lost during a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen, but is recovered by the Laughing Mask.

EIGHTH EPISODE

The Stroke of Twelve.

Enoch Golden had never been known as a half-hearted fighter. He was, in fact, of that pertinacious breed who fight best when half defeated. And as he grew into a fuller realization of the virulence of Jules Legar's hatred for him and his house, he proceeded to take more effective steps to protect himself.

One of his precautions was to place a guard about the house which had been repeatedly and audaciously invaded by Legar and his henchmen. But there were not only a couple of paid sentinels about the door, but the manly and his activities. He strove for still more substantial protection by installing in one of the upper rooms of his house a huge burglar-proof vault of chromium steel. The installation of so ponderous a vault, however, involved much material strengthening of a structure not primarily designed for the support of seven-ton safes, and for days a small body of expert workmen had been busy putting in pillars and girders and disguising these ponderous supports under a veneer of mahogany ceiling beams and oriental teakwood columns. In the ornamentation of the latter, in fact, the owner of the house found a valued assistant in Count Luigi Da Espares who, with his finished taste and his knowledge of the fine arts, advanced many suggestions for beautifying what might otherwise have been an ungainly and cumbersome innovation.

It was Margery Golden, even more than her father, to whom Da Espares, in these small efforts, looked for gratitude. And the more Margery Golden saw of that gallant young antiquarian the more mysteriously impressed she became.

David Manley, who was not altogether ignorant of this new turn in the tide of events, found little to add to his happiness in this evergrowing intimacy between Margery and her guest. For Manley, by this time, did more than merely distrust Da Espares; he hated him.

These vague misgivings of Manley's extended even to the costume dinner-dance which this esthetic foreigner undertook to engineer for Margery's amusement. And in talking over his plans with Golden himself, as the latter was making ready for one of his hurried trips to Washington, the young nobleman even ventured the hope that this fête might be made the occasion of an even more auspicious announcement.

But the morose-eyed old millionaire did not quite follow the other's line of thought. So Da Espares was driven to the expedient of openly yet courtously requesting the privilege of pressing his suit for the hand of this fairest daughter of America.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the astounded financier. "Are you trying to tell me that you want to marry my daughter?"

"That is the honor of which I have dreamed," was Da Espares' quietly intoned reply.

"Well, the point is, has my Margery been dreaming along the same line?"

"That I cannot venture to say," replied that uncourtly gallant suitor.

"Well, in America that's about the first thing that counts! And I guess we'd better call off this courtship talk until we find out how the girl feels about it!"

The disappointed, but not disheartened count, accordingly, proceeded quietly yet astutely to sound Margery Golden herself as to her feelings in the matter. But how too, he was not without a very good reason for his interest, was a fact which he did not conceal.

"But you at least know that I wish to bring you happiness, that I was your friend in the past, that always in the future I want to be your friend."

"When a friend is so kind as to remain so hard on me, I am not sure."

"Then the mask may be withdrawn, and withdrawn sooner than you expect."

"Just what does that mean?" asked the clear-eyed girl, studying his face.

"It means that I am about to make a move which will deliver you and your father from his enemy. And this time I think the plan will succeed."

Mysterious as that plan was, it developed through an incident which soon brought things down to the plane of the practical. For when the masons and ironworkers who were completing the installation of the new Golden vault returned from their mid-day meal a far-from-attractive stranger stole into the house at their heels. And when David Manley happened to catch sight of this stranger deep in talk with Count Da Espares, he promptly jumped to the conclusion that he had at last discovered something on which to concentrate all his earlier Scotch-mists of suspicion.

For Da Espares' visitor unmistakably bore the earmarks of the unkempt denizen of the hop-joint and the Bowery saloon.

"What is this man doing here?" he asked as he confronted the intruder. "This man is here at my request. And the happiness of this house depends much on his visit," was Da Espares' retort.

"What has a crook like Red Egan got to do with the happiness of this house?" scoffed the irate Manley. "And what right have you to bring a tool of Legar's into this room?"

But still Da Espares remained outwardly calm.

"Pardon," he replied. "But this man you call Red Egan is no longer a crook and no longer a tool of Legar's!"

"Then what is he doing here?"

"That, monsieur, concerns mostly the young lady for whom I have sent!" The soft-spoken foreigner swung about as Margery Golden stepped a little wonderingly into the room.

"This, Miss Golden," said Da Espares, "is the man of whom I spoke to you. As your friend here protests, this man has been a tool of Legar's. But he has tired of being the servant of so evil a man. He now seeks to have the state extend its pardon to him. And as a price for this pardon he is willing to deliver into our hands Jules Legar!"

"But what is the plan?" asked the girl, with a touch of impatience.

Da Espares, with upturned shoulders, looked from the one to the other. "It is a plan which we had thought it wise to keep a secret," he suavely explained.

"Mr. Manley has earned the right to be included in any secrets which may involve the capture of Legar," Margery Golden quietly assured the faintly smiling count, who bowed in acquiescence. And realizing the note of authority in that reply, he outlined the plan in as few words as possible.

That plan, with Red Egan as their emissary, was not a complicated one. This renegade from Legar's gang was to go to his old-time chief and report that Margery Golden might be found at such and such a spot, at such and such a time. She would be alone. And to Legar and his men, waiting there, it would seem a simple enough matter to recapture the girl. But that capture would never be effected. For a squad of police would be held there, in hiding, and when the moment arrived, they would promptly surround Legar and his men and put them where they belonged.

"In other words, monsieur, what we propose to do is to set a trap, and when this Iron Claw is about to gather in his prey, he himself will be gathered in."

"You propose to set a trap," repeated the incredulous Manley, "and you also calmly propose to take this unprotected young girl and use her as the bait for that trap?"

"On the contrary, monsieur, she will not be unprotected. Many duly appointed officers of the law will be there. And, as I have already explained to her, I also will be there. And Miss Golden, I think, knows that I would readily give up my life for the sake of keeping her from harm!"

"Is that the way you feel about it?" demanded Manley, swinging about to the slightly frowning girl.

"Count Da Espares and I will carry out this plan, and we will carry it out, I hope, quite as successfully as we may carry out still other plans. And in the count's hands I shall always feel that I am fully protected!"

David Manley, thus dismissed, had the dubious satisfaction of knowing that he had once more made a mess of things. Yet he did not remain altogether inactive. He watched his chance and quietly installed a dictaphone in the room, attaching the transmitter-disk to the underside of the desk ledge where Da Espares did most of his talking, and running his well-hidden wires down through the floor to a linen closet, which the ever-dependable Wilson threw open for him. There Manley made the discovery that police headquarters had actually been contacted by the Masked One, and that the latter had indeed carried out his end, was intended to carry every sign of sincerity.

Before another hour slipped by, however, Manley made two further dis-

coveries. The first was that the appointed time for the coup had been suddenly changed to an hour earlier. The second was that the trap for Legar was not to be set along the wooded road leading up to the clubhouse of the Greenock golf links, as first decided upon. But Margery Golden was to motor alone to the west end of the turnpike bridge and there encounter her old-time enemy of the Iron Claw. And the police, Da Espares assured her, had been duly warned as to the change of location.

Manley, on overhearing that declaration, promptly called up headquarters and made the startling discovery that no such message had gone in to the authorities there.

In five minutes he was in his own car, hastening to a conference with central office itself. In another five minutes, on learning from Wilson over the wire that Da Espares and Margery had already left the house in the limousine, Manley had his car filled with armed plain-clothes men from the central office and was speeding out through the city as fast as a motor could carry him. As they swept up the dusty approach to the bridge they even saw that they were none too soon.

For already, in the bright afternoon sunlight, they could make out a glimmering limousine as it came to a stop at the end of the bridge. They could see a somewhat hesitating and white-faced girl step from this limousine at the same moment that they caught sight of a group of men emerge quickly from the shrubbery at the end of the bridge itself.

These men, spreading out fanlike, swept past the limousine in which Da Espares and the chauffeur were still seated. Four of them, rounding the car, cut off the girl's avenue of retreat. Another four advanced on her from the bridge-end, at the same time that a fifth man leaped to the running board and started to struggle with the chauffeur.

Even as he stared at that quickly shifting scene Manley could make out the figure of Legar himself. He could see the Iron Claw reach out for the startled figure of the girl, crouched back against the bridge railing, even as his own car-wheels leaped from the approach to the bridge timbers themselves. He could also make out Da Espares' sudden leap from the waiting limousine. Manley, on beholding this, gave a cry of warning to the plain-clothes men about him, for he could plainly see the glint of a revolver in Da Espares' hand. But Da Espares, as that car of deliverance thundered on across the bridge, did not turn to face it. Instead, he fought his way through the circle of burly figures surrounding Margery Golden. He fought



The Figure Was Strangely Stoop-Shouldered.

and shouldered his way through to the side of the girl even as Legar reached for her shrieking body. He struck blindly at that outstretched arm, struck still again at Legar's face, at the same moment that Manley's car shuddered to a stop and the armed men from its tonneau leaped into the fight.

It was a brief fight, but a bitter one, and much of it escaped Manley's attention. The one thing that held him transfixed was the sudden vision of Da Espares dodging through the iron girders to sudden pursuit of Legar, as the latter, breaking free from his enemies, ran to the opposite side of the bridge. There, seeing retreat on either quarter already cut off, that masked criminal nimbly mounted the iron railing and gave one glance towards the water below him. Yet, as he poised there, ready to leap, Da Espares leveled his weapon and fired.

Manley could hear the shrill scream of the girl, and the shouts of the startled men, the great splash of the tumbling body as it catapulted down in the black-running water. The next moment the captain and his uniformed squad from the Greenock clubhouse were charging across the bridge, joining in with their plain-clothes colleagues already forcing the last of Legar's adherents to flight. And as Manley made his way toward the glimmering limousine and Margery Golden he could hear the latter's nervous sobs as she leaned weakly against the bridge railing and wept.

"Did you kill him?" she asked with a voice tremulous with horror as Da Espares stepped to her side.

"Your enemy is dead!" was the latter's quiet-toned reply. "He sank at once. And this time he will never return."

The Unbidden Guest.

The gallant Count Luigi Da Espares, in view of his much-talked-of victory on the Turnpike bridge, found himself forced into the not unbecoming role of a hero. If that discreet nobleman took advantage of the high esteem in which he momentarily stood to push through to completion certain arrangements for the costume ball on which he seemed to have set his heart.

Knowing what he knew, the secretary still regarded that impending function as a danger in disguise, just as he still nursed very substantial doubts as to the actual death of Legar.

So fixed was Manley in his suspicions, however, that he insisted on a conference with Enoch Golden himself. From that conference he won small consolation for his suspicions.

Manley, in fact, had given up any hope of further argument on the question, when a trivial yet disquieting incident occurred, and in occurring brought about a slight change in Enoch Golden's attitude. This incident involved the receipt of a strange missive bearing the signature of that elusive interloper in the affairs of the house of Golden known as the Laughing Mask. It read as follows:

Count Luigi Da Espares is not only an impostor, but also your enemy. And as a friend I herewith warn you that he is not to be trusted.

Even this epistle, which bore only the emblem of a Laughing Mask for signature, might have been accepted as of no great importance, had not Enoch Golden been the recipient of still another communication. This time it was a telephone message from a stranger, acknowledging himself to be an active colleague of the Iron Claw's.

"Legar may be gone," said this unknown voice over the wire, "but his work is going to go on, and don't you forget it! You still hold that chart, if the chief didn't get his chart, before he cashed in, I'm the guy who's going to get it!"

"All right," was Golden's shouted response. "You come up here and get it! And at the same time you'll get what you deserve!"

Then, having slammed down the receiver, the deliverer of that ultimatum promptly sent for his secretary.

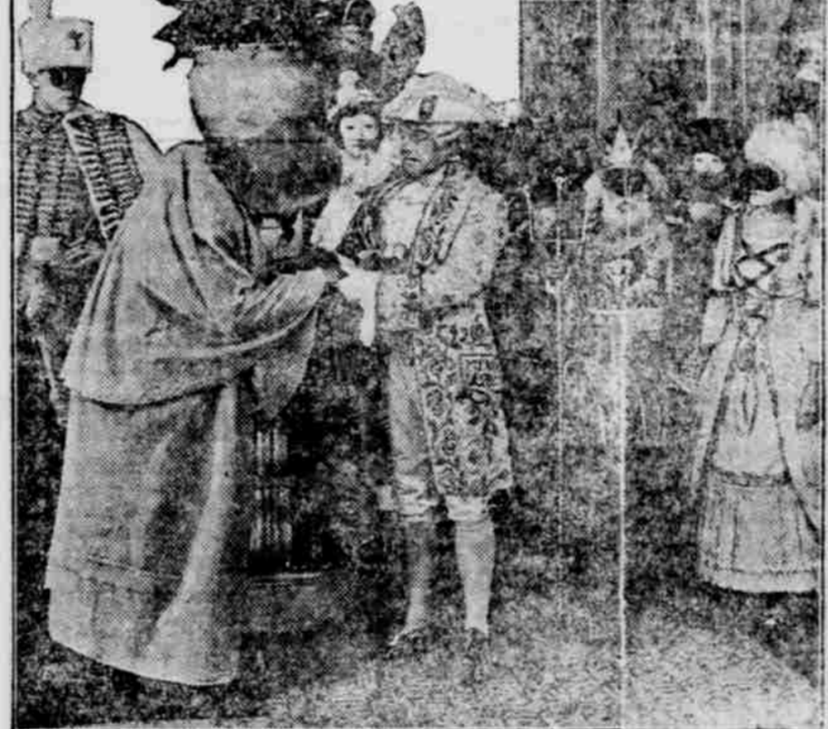
"I want extra guards put around this house!" was Golden's command. "And I want nobody to come into it who can't be accounted for!"

"Tonight will be a hard time, I'm afraid, to put that order into execution," explained Manley.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You can't give a masked ball and put every guest on a microscope-slide as he comes in!"

"Manley, how are we to know just who or what those guests are, if



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they're coming into this house with all sorts of make-up on?"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to make you see for the last four days!" was Manley's reply. "And it's exactly what that man Da Espares has been maneuvering for, or I lose my one last bet! And if this man Legar is still alive, all we've been doing is putting a strip of red carpet down for him to walk on!"

"Well, I'll be at the other end of that carpet waiting for him!" was the old fighter's thunderous retort.

"That's exactly what I want you to do, what I ask you to do. That's our one chance, if what I suspect proves to be the case! You can disguise faces, in an affair like this tonight, but you can't disguise a lost hand."

Golden stood slowly shaking his head up and down in comprehension. "And if our Iron Claw is there, Davy, we'll give him a welcome that he's going to remember!"

Two hours later, as Enoch Golden stood with his daughter at his side receiving their guests, it would have taken a particular penetrating eye to detect any darker undercurrent of intrigue to that rippling tide of color and mirth which eddied about them. So punctilious was Golden in his hearty hand-grasp to each of those incoming visitors, that Margery herself made note of this newer phase in her father's character.

Side by side with a Flemish nun walked a Parisian Apache, then came a Montenegrin peasant and a bewigged Oriental Squire, then a red-suited pirate and a velvet-clad Venetian Doge. Then, following a run on "Bitters," who laughingly proclaimed himself to be Hully Geo, the Chinese Giant, came an equally tall figure in a gold-braided Arabian burnoose. This

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The Merriment at the Crowded Table Was at Its Height.

figure, for all its height, was strangely stoop-shouldered, moving with a dignity of step which went well with the voluminous drapery in which it was clad. And Manley watched closely as this stately Arabian chieftain, bowing gravely to Golden, reached out two ungloved hands to greet the two hands which his host extended to him. About these hands he saw at a glance, there could be nothing doubtful.

But Manley had little time to give further thought to the scene, for at that moment he became aware of the fact that Da Espares had slipped away to another part of the house—and during that night, Manley had determined he would keep an eye on his enigmatic foreign friend. But instead of following Da Espares, on discovering him stepping quietly into the deserted library, the alert-eyed young secretary promptly retreated to the quarter where the receiver of his dictaphone was concealed. There, on placing this watch-case receiver to his ear, Manley had the satisfaction of catching the faint hum of voices. Much of that guarded talk taking place in the library Manley could not overhear, but he caught enough to arouse his curiosity.

"Then the plan has worked?" asked the anxious voice of Da Espares.

"Without a hitch," answered the other voice. "The girders have been cut through and the bomb placed!"

"And the clock fuse adjusted?"

"Yes."

"But what was it set for?"

"For the stroke of twelve!" answered the unknown voice. "By that time the crowd will be at the table, eating!"

"But how," asked the anxious voice of Da Espares, "could we get Legar inside?"

The sound of a triumphantly quick laugh came over the little instrument.

"Legar is already here!" announced the other.

"Hush! Not so loud!" warned Da Espares. And from that point on it was only broken phrases that trickled into the hidden listener's ear.

"Come as an Arab chief. . . ."

Nicchia the Dago acrobat on his back . . . yes, under cloak . . . could hold out both hands . . . and never even suspected . . . being watched . . . can't afford to lose this time!"

Again came the sound of the quietly triumphant laugh. And it was Da Espares' voice that sounded clearly the next moment.

"But how did he work that bridge fall?"

" . . . long dive . . . came up under a lumber schooner's stern and hung to rudder chain . . . down with title . . . an hour later . . . swam ashore . . . launch to Oyster Joe's!"

Manley did not wait for more. Midnight, he knew, was already too perilously close for half measures. By the time he reached the upper floor, in fact, he found Enoch Golden already heading the grand march to the great table running almost the full length of the huge room opening off the conservatory. The next moment he saw Da Espares himself step hurriedly, yet smilingly to the side of Margery Golden and take their places in that gay-colored line that rippled with laughter and movement as the orchestra once more struck up. Then, remembering what he had overheard about mysterious weakened girders and planted bombs, Manley likewise remembered the newly installed vault and the fact that Legar's final object was the possession of a certain paper which that vault held. And he slipped out through the door, and on through the empty conservatory, frantically wondering just what his first move to avert that impending catastrophe should be.

The figure which intervened in that crisis, however, was a much more picturesque one than the slight figure of a young private secretary in somewhat disheveled evening clothes. For when the merriment about the great crowded table was at its height an unexpected and unwelcome guest strode in through the wide door and confronted the company there assembled. This figure wore a dust-stained motor coat and cap. But the most conspicuous feature of his attire was the yellow mask which covered his face. Equally conspicuous was the huge blue-barreled revolver which he firmly held in his right hand. This weapon, in fact, glinted momentarily in the swirling light as the stranger's left hand was suddenly lifted for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he proclaimed in a clear voice, "this intrusion, I fear, may shock you. But you

are about to be shocked in a much more serious way. On the stroke of twelve there is to be an accident here, perhaps something much graver than an accident, in which it is my great desire that you should not participate! So I must ask each and every one of you to leave this room, and this house, as quietly yet as quickly as possible! Every one," repeated that authoritative-voiced intruder as Da Espares and the tall man in the Arabian burnoose rose to their feet, "except these two gentlemen here!"

Out of the silence that ensued on that declaration arose a small murmur of wonder, a stir of nervousness, and one shrill laugh from a woman holding a wine glass. Then Enoch Golden himself called out an angry expostulation, followed by a sharp word or two of command. But the company had already risen. For the masked stranger, stepping still closer to Da Espares and the figure in the flowing burnoose, had coolly intercepted them as they moved in unison towards a side door.

"Get back, both of you," the clear voice behind the yellow mask had called out, "or before God I'll shoot you down where you stand!"

That sudden threat of violence was the spring which released the tension. There were mingled shouts of resentment and fear, followed by a quick and unreasoning rush for the door, courtiers and nuns and peasants and Apaches and Geisha girls in contending flurry of fiery and frightened faces.

For a minute or two the master of the house struggled in vain to stop them. Then his attention was directed towards the Laughing Mask, for the latter, advancing with a quick stride to the man in the burnoose, jerked aside that flowing garment and revealed Legar himself, Legar with a sinisterly seared face and an iron claw at the end of his right arm. And the same moment that this movement was taking place, Da Espares himself, with his eyes always on the Laughing Mask, stole quick step by step towards the door on his left. He had reached that door before his enemy detected him.

The man with the revolver wheeled about and fired as the Spanish knight in silk and lace dived through the opening. Legar, seeing his chance in that division of interest, charged boldly through the damask-laden table, scattering silver and glass and flowers as he went. In another breath he had reached the conservatory, where, a second or two later, his iron-shod arm could be heard flailing through the fragile barrier of glass between him and the outer world. And by the time Enoch Golden reached the spot his enemy had vanished.

Yet in almost the same breath the Laughing Mask had leaped in the opposite direction, in pursuit of the fleeing Da Espares. But that flight, wherever it led or might have led, was interrupted by a sudden detonation that shook the great house to its foundation. There was a roar of falling girders, the splintering of wood, the rumble of a great avalanche, as a seven-ton steel vault, deprived of its supports, crashed down through the stony flooring, carrying dust and debris and tumbling pieces of household furniture as it went. Nor did that massive thing of metal stop until it bedded itself in the broken cement flooring of the cellar below. Then above the "rattle of falling plaster and echoing showers of scattering bric-a-brac rose the quick cry of human voices calling for help.

Golden, staring dazed at the great room through which sudden ruin had erupted, was scarcely conscious of the frightened girl clinging so forlornly to his arm. He was scarcely conscious of the throng of servants and watchmen who ran back and forth through the dusty rooms. He quaveringly helped his daughter to a chair. She stared wide-eyed at Wilson as the latter led David Manley, limping a little and much disordered as to apparel, into the room.

"Is anybody hurt?" asked the white-faced girl.

The ever dependable old butler looked at Manley, who in turn looked away.

"I'm sorry, Miss Margery," Wilson hesitatingly explained, "but it is the Count Da Espares!"

"You mean he is?"

The old butler nodded.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Margery. They have just found his body, crushed under the vault!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)